

Neighborhood Assistance Center Strategic Plan

2014-2015



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City of Austin Planning and Development Review
Department—Neighborhood Assistance Center

austintexas.gov/departments/neighborhood-assistance-center

Summary

This document describes the scope of services provided by the Neighborhood Assistance Center (NAC) within the City of Austin Planning and Development Review Department, reviews the accomplishments of the NAC in FY 2013, and outlines a plan for the work to be accomplished by the NAC in FY 2014 and FY 2015.

Background

The NAC was established in early 2009 and two Neighborhood Advisors were hired to staff the Center in March 2009. The Neighborhood Advisors were intended to provide Austin area neighborhood groups with better access to the City's resources, processes, and how to be proactive in decisions made that affect neighborhoods. An internal audit of the NAC was conducted in February 2012. The audit made two key recommendations:

1. A plan be developed and implemented to ensure proactive educational programs and outreach to provide equal opportunity access to the NAC services for all City Neighborhoods.
2. Internal controls should be developed and implemented to insure appropriate guidance is provided for NAC staff and a framework for documenting, reviewing, and monitoring procedures are developed.

The Neighborhood Advisors were assigned a front line supervisor within the Comprehensive Planning Division of PDRD in December 2012, and all subtasks identified under the 2012 audit have subsequently been completed.

Mission of the Neighborhood Assistance Center

The Neighborhood Assistance Center provides educational resources and information about City of Austin's operations and services. The center facilitates and assists effective communication between neighborhood stakeholders and the City of Austin.

Staffing and Organization

The NAC is currently staffed by two full time Neighborhood Advisors. The NAC provides service to multiple divisions within the Planning and Development Review Department and serves as a resource for other City departments as well as neighborhood groups. Within the reporting structure of the City, the Neighborhood Advisors report directly to a Principal Planner within the Comprehensive Planning Division, and participate as members of the Implementation Team within Comprehensive Planning.

Future Expansion: The NAC was originally envisioned to be staffed by four full time Neighborhood Advisors; however, to date only two of those positions have been funded and filled. As the NAC grows its capabilities, and as demand for NAC services grow, it is possible that the remaining positions would be filled in the future.

Programs

Through its various programs, the Neighborhood Assistance Center provides a targeted range of services to its internal and external customers.

Information and Referral Services

The NAC provides information and referral services to individuals who contact the Center or are referred to the Center. As part of this function, the Neighborhood Advisors answer questions, aid customers in identifying and accessing City resources via the website, and refer stakeholders with issues outside of the scope of the NAC to 3-1-1 or the appropriate City Department. The information and referral services are targeted to the varying needs of neighborhood groups attempting to navigate the City system, and are provided as a supplement to other information and referral services provided by City departments and workgroups including 3-1-1, the Public Information Office, and the Development Assistance Center within the Planning and Development Review Department. The Neighborhood Advisors provide assistance via telephone and e-mail. All contacts to the NAC are recorded in an “Issues Register” spreadsheet, and individuals contacting the NAC are asked to respond to a satisfaction survey regarding the services received. While the Neighborhood Advisors endeavor to appropriately refer anyone who contacts the Center, the Center’s focus is on providing information and resources to self-identified neighborhood associations and similar groups.

This plan calls for continuing to provide these information and referral services, and increasing the diversity of the neighborhood groups who access these services.

Education and Training

The NAC provides education and training on City processes and resources that may be of interest to neighborhood groups, including neighborhood associations, neighborhood plan contact teams, and other neighborhood groups registered in the City’s Community Registry. To date, NAC education and training has been provided primarily on an ad hoc basis and in partnership with other City Divisions and Departments.

This plan calls for formalizing the education and training program by designing and implementing a series of trainings and educational opportunities that can be hosted by the Neighborhood Assistance Center throughout the year.

On-Line Education and Engagement

The Neighborhood Assistance Center directly maintains several useful resources on the City website including a Neighborhood Assistance Center webpage, a Planning and Development Review On Line Tools and Resources webpage, and an on-line help document for the Interactive Development Review Permitting and Inspection system (aka external AMANDA). Neighborhood Advisors also provide support to Public Information staff engaged in maintenance of the Community Registry. One of the two Neighborhood Advisors serves in a dual role, working in partnership with department Public Information

staff and various department content owners to maintain Planning and Development Review Department resources on the City of Austin website.

This plan calls for enhancing the education and engagement materials available to neighborhood groups through the Neighborhood Assistance Center webpage, improving the usability of other Planning and Development Review web resources for neighborhood groups and other members of the public, and partnering with the Communications and Public Information Office and other City departments to get the word out electronically about NAC services.

Consultation and Outreach Support

The NAC partners with other City Divisions and Departments to facilitate neighborhood stakeholder feedback and input on City-driven projects, programs and basic services and provides neighborhood engagement consultation and advice to departments embarking on public involvement activities relating to projects, programs and services. The NAC also coordinates with the Communications and Public Information Office to provide information to stakeholders for city/area wide projects and City planning initiatives, to provide assistance with department alignment with adopted public engagement principles, and to support Communications and Public Information Office-driven outreach and engagement initiatives. The NAC has historically provided these consultation services on an as-requested basis.

This plan calls for continuing to provide these consultation services and outreach support, and developing a strategy to make more City work groups aware of the scope of consultation services provided and when to take advantage of the expertise provided by the Neighborhood Advisors.

Engagement of Neighborhood Groups

The Neighborhood Assistance Center serves as a liaison between the Planning and Development Review Department and various neighborhood groups including the Austin Neighborhoods Council, Neighborhood Associations, and other geographically-based community groups that have self-identified within the Community Registry.¹ The Neighborhood Advisors attend regular meetings of the Austin Neighborhood Council and other groups, participate in discussions between neighborhood groups and the City related to development and other topics, and have coordinated engagement activities around particular topics on an as requested basis.

This plan calls for continuing to provide on-going engagement of the neighborhood groups that have traditionally accessed NAC services, reaching out to additional neighborhood groups through a variety of means in order to increase the diversity of the Neighborhood Assistance Center customer base, and developing engagement activities that create opportunities for increased trust and collaboration between neighborhood groups and the City.

¹ The engagement work of the Neighborhood Assistance Center is complemented by an additional Planner within PDRD who serves as the primary point of contact for Neighborhood Plan Contact Teams, which serve a unique function under City Code.

FY 2013 Accomplishments

The Neighborhood Assistance Center had numerous noteworthy accomplishments in FY 2013 including:

- ☑ **Improved Management Controls.** At the beginning of FY 2013, the Neighborhood Advisors were assigned a front-line supervisor within PDRD and began attending weekly team meetings and providing weekly reports of activities and accomplishments to their supervisor. The Neighborhood Advisors continued to use an Issues Register spreadsheet to record all requests for information and services and developed documentation for consistent use of the Issues Register.
- ☑ **Information and Referral.** In FY 2013, the Neighborhood Assistance Center received and recorded in the Issues Register approximately 519 requests for information and assistance. All of these requests were responded to within 2 days and fulfilled or referred to the appropriate City staff.
- ☑ **Customer Satisfaction Survey.** In FY 2013, the Neighborhood Assistance Center launched a customer satisfaction survey and began including a link to this survey in their e-mail signature line. 100% of the NAC customers who took the survey in FY 2013 reported that they were “very satisfied” with the services they received from the NAC.
- ☑ **Consultation and Outreach Support.** The Neighborhood Assistance Center provided consultation and outreach support to numerous City Departments and initiatives in FY 2013, including:
 - Ongoing support to Special Events Office, including consultation on special events ordinance and incorporation of neighborhood input into planning for specific events;
 - Support to Watershed Protection Department and Council Member Morrison’s office related to localized flooding and infrastructure issues in the vicinity of South Lamar;
 - Support to Public Works Neighborhood Partnering Program;
 - Support to APD related to National Night Out;
 - Ongoing participation in Communications and Public Information Office initiatives including: utilization of Next Door, Community Conversation Corps, and Community Registry database improvements.
 - Ongoing support to Communications and Technology Management launch of a new public portal for AMANDA.
 - Ongoing support to South Austin Combined Neighborhood Planning Process.
 - Consultation with ATD staff involved in Central Corridor planning.

- ☑ **Facilitation of ANC Workshop on CodeNEXT.** In response to a request from the Austin Neighborhoods Council, a Neighborhood Advisor worked with the CodeNext team and ANC Code Committee to develop a workshop on CodeNEXT targeted to ANC members and other neighborhood groups and provided facilitation support for this successful event.
- ☑ **On Line Tools Training.** The Neighborhood Advisors collaborated with the Department's Neighborhood Plan Contact Team coordinator to design a training curriculum on available on line tools related to development and development review. The Neighborhood Advisors successfully delivered this curriculum to approximately 15 representatives of neighborhood groups at an initial training session in North Austin, and all of the post-training evaluations from attendees were positive. (The Neighborhood Assistance Center intends to continue to hone the curriculum and provide this training to other audiences, and to develop a downloadable, on-line version of the training.)
- ☑ **Close Out of Audit.** In FY 2013 the Neighborhood Assistance Center completed all remaining tasks identified under an internal organizational audit conducted by the City Auditor in February 2012, and provided final requested documentation to close out the reporting under the audit.
- ☑ **Website Improvements.** In FY 2013, the Neighborhood Advisor with responsibilities related to managing department web pages, continued to make improvements to the website including deletion of obsolete files, addition of content, update of information, and improved website navigation for neighborhood groups and other members of the general public.

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